

## **The Life of Abraham - The communion of faith Learning to listen, Genesis 18 - 19**

*[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” Well for times read places, and not so much a tale of two cities but a tale of two sittings. In September last year we started a series of talks based on the life of Abraham and the impact that his faith had upon his life and the decisions he made. This series begins again today as we look at the communion of faith – learning to listen.

Perhaps you have heard the saying that “so and so is so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good.” On the surface of things, there may be a grain of truth in this. We might all be able to think of some folk who appear so other worldly that the ordinary events of this life have no impact on them, nor they on this world. However, as we will see this morning nothing could be further from the real truth. It is those who are truly heavenly minded that are most useful in this world.

Time does not allow us to read the whole of chapters 18 and 19 of Genesis right now, but perhaps later you may wish to do so to fill in the full details of the story. Be warned, though, the details of chapter 19 are sordid and soul depressing in the extreme. So much for the glory of mankind! However, we will read the first verses of the two chapters as they provide us with an interesting comparison that will set the scene for the rest of our talk.

“Then the LORD appeared to [Abraham] by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing beside him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground.” Genesis 18:1 - 2

“Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and he bowed himself with his face towards the ground.” Genesis 19:1

I think that the contrast that we have in these two verses could not be more telling as regards the spiritual condition and priorities of these two men. Earlier in their history, Abraham and Lot had separated as they had both grown rich and prospered. Their herdsmen had come into conflict as they increasingly struggled for water and grazing for their flocks. Lot had chosen the well watered and fertile plains of the Jordan and gone to live near to the exceedingly wicked city of Sodom. Abraham had gone in the opposite direction and pitched his tents far away from others. By chapter 19, we find Lot sitting in the gate of Sodom. I think that this refers to more than just geographical location. To sit in the gate was to be in a position of some authority and influence. This was where the city elders would meet and discuss all the news and make decisions that would affect the lives of the citizens of Sodom. So, Lot had opted for a place of importance and the comforts that city living would bring. Undoubtedly, he was a man of faith and his position was not easy. We read in 2 Peter 2:7 - 8: “...righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds.)”

Lot may well have hoped that by becoming a part of the decision-making process, by getting involved in the government of the city, he would be able to restrain the evil of his day and be a force for good. This is a noble aim but also a forlorn one. In Genesis 19:9, as the men of Sodom are actively engaged in terrible behaviour they say to Lot: ““Stand back!” Then they said, “This one came in to stay here, and he keeps acting as a judge; now we will deal worse with you than with them.”” Far from having a good reputation amongst the people, they resented him and his presence amongst them. Lot was a man whose testimony was blown. All he had left was the bitter anguish that their immorality would cause him.

There was also a sadly corrosive effect on his own soul. When the holy messengers arrive in Sodom, after their visit to Abraham we read that Lot rose to meet them; however, we read that Abraham ran to meet them. I think that continuing exposure to evil dulls our spiritual sensibilities and lowers our spiritual fervour. Whilst Lot may well have been glad to have these divine messengers, there may also have been a subtle embarrassment that held him back and left him dreadfully conflicted. I know I have felt like this before! Maybe some unconfessed sin or desire to please self has left me less than eager to come into the Lord’s presence. Perhaps I arrive at the Lord’s Supper with nothing to say, no contribution of worship to make and a clock watching attitude that leaves little room for an experience with Jesus.

There was also a corrosive effect upon Lot’s family. In verse 14 the message that Lot brought to his sons-in-law of God’s impending judgement left them thinking that Lot was joking. In verse 26 Lot’s wife dies as she is unable to tear herself away from the comfortable life that she had made for herself. In verses 30 – 38, Lot’s daughters show just how wrong a twisted religion, that conforms on the outside but is very wrong on the inside, can be. They do not want to marry a foreign husband, one who is not of the chosen people of God. But their solution is unspeakably gross. The children they had would become the enemies of God’s people for generations to come and cause them great grief. And yet from one of their number, Ruth the Moabite, would also come David – Israel’s great warrior king, and through him, Jesus, the Saviour of the world. Such is the gracious power of our omnipotent God!

As a husband and a father, I need to challenge myself as to what influence I have within my own family. My choices will have a direct impact upon their spirituality. In the pursuit of worldly position, advancement at work, or the pursuit of my hobbies my family may lose the spiritual example that will keep them close to the Lord. Lot wanted to have it all, and found that he ended up with nothing! There must be a solemn warning for each one of us today in the sorry life of Lot.

However, Abraham stands in lovely contrast to all this! Outwardly, he had taken the harder path, the desert and the wilderness. Far from the cities, he seemed to have forfeited the position to influence affairs. Living in a tent, he remained at heart a pilgrim, whereas what filled Lot’s heart were his possessions. So the divine messengers find Abraham at the door to his tent, ready to move whenever God called. As soon as he sees them he runs to meet them.

My son and I used to walk to the bus stop. Except this one cold winter’s morning, the bus was a little early and we could see it approaching the stop and we were not there. I ran for all I was worth and just made it in time. As we sat down, my son said that it was unseemly to see old men run, or words to that effect. I should have poked him in the eye for calling me an old man, but managed to explain between gulps for air that old men don’t like standing at cold bus stops instead! Abraham certainly was an old man but apparently he did not mind running either! Nor did the father in the story of the prodigal son, so full was his heart for his wayward son. It has been said that in picture form, this was the only time that we see God in a hurry!

If we want to truly listen to God, then we do need to have a heart that longs to be in His presence – a pilgrim heart. Although Abraham was rich, he had never settled into a comfortable existence in this world. He was waiting, listening for his God to tell him where next to go. He had joined the ranks of those who would go for the “stresses and miseries of overachievement,” as Simon Barnes

once related in the Sports columns about 15 years ago. He wrote this:

“Prince Rabadash’s army lay close behind them, Anvard ahead. If they did not reach Anvard before Rabadash and his horde, their journey – their entire lives – would have been wasted. The horses, Bree and Hwin (both of whom could, of course, talk) galloped. Certainly both horses were doing, if not all they could, all they thought they could do; which is not quite the same thing. But a lion appears out of nowhere and with the spur of terror, Bree now discovered that he had not really been going as fast – not quite as fast – as he could.”

This of course, from the Chronicles of Narnia, that fount of a million simple and usually overlooked truths. Perhaps of all the temptations we meet in this life, the subtlest of all is the comfort zone, that invitation to settle for less, to go for content when the stresses and miseries of overachievement beckon. The way that takes you out of the comfort zone is the path less travelled by. Most of us, when we come to that place where the two paths divide, prefer the one that leads to safety, to warmth, to comfort.

Abraham was not the kind of man that had opted for safety, for warmth, for comfort. Living as a pilgrim, he is ready, expecting almost, for when his visitors appear. He runs to meet them and implores them to break their journey with him. Once the meal is prepared for them, he stands and waits as they ate. Perhaps in his experiences of God he had already learned patience. I know that if it had been me, I would have wanted the divine message first and then food later. Not so Abraham. If God had a message for him, then God would deliver it in just the right time and Abraham was content to wait and listen.

How often I might try and force God’s hand. I can see a work needs to be done and so I scheme and strive, trying to make it happen the way I think it should. It is so frustrating that nobody else seems to think like I do and join me in making it happen. Now, of course, there is a time to act and work hard, but there is also a time to wait and stand still and listen, and Abraham knew this. Once the meal was over, the angelic messenger reveals His message – more waiting and then the promised son. Of course, the message could have been that the son would be born tomorrow – nothing is too hard for God. Either way it was a miracle. I think we see in this that God has as much to teach us as He has to do through us. Abraham may have already learnt the lesson of patience, but he was going to learn it again. So often in life, God would teach us the same thing over and over until we really are like the Lord Jesus.

But then the time came for the messenger to leave. Was one divine message enough for Abraham – the man of faith and friend of God? Oh no! So, in verses 16 and 17, as the messengers leave, we read that ““Abraham went with them to send them on their way. And the LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing?”” For the rest of the chapter we have this amazing conversation as Abraham barter for the lives of the people of Sodom and God graciously gives Abraham what he asks for. In fact, as things turn out, God goes far beyond what Abraham dared to ask for. You see, we can never care more than God does. Abraham, the pilgrim, the separate spiritual man may well have had a heart full of love for his fellow man, but God’s heart was far bigger!

The contrast with Lot could not be greater. We have seen how Lot lost almost everything but Abraham is left full. A wife who respects him and the promise of a son, whose descendants many years into the future would give rise to Boaz, another man of faith, who would marry Ruth the Moabite descendent of Lot. The wonderful, unimaginable ways of grace that God weaves together across the tapestry of time! God uses the faithful and the worldly alike to accomplish His great plan of salvation. “So”, you might say, “what is the point of being a pilgrim, of suffering the exertions of achieving more?” That is an important question and one that we need to answer clearly. I think it likely that we are only going to follow the path less walked, along with Abraham, if

we can see that it works. I think that in these two chapters we have three answers that are really vital if we are to live victorious Christian lives to the full.

Firstly, on a purely selfish and physical level, ask yourself who came out of this encounter with God the richer in terms solely of the things of this life? Unquestionably Abraham. It is one of the great deceptions of the devil that the believer who sacrifices everything has nothing! We fear that if we give up our time, our money, our career or whatever else it may be, then this world will be a poorer place for us. We fear that we only live once and we will have missed out on something good. Undeniably, we may miss out on something good, but only to have God pour into the void something far better. Nature abhors a vacuum apparently, and if that is so, it must be because God has created His universe that way. So if we empty our lives of earthly things, then we will either refill them with more of the same or God must fill that space. Which is likely to be better for me? As I read this, you might almost be able to hear me thinking that that is a no brainer. And yet so often I still hesitate to give up something for God, just in case! That must be why Abraham was a man of faith and I am not. He gave up home and friends and influence and found that he had not given up anything at all. Thus his faith grew and grew every time he tested God. He found God more than able!

Secondly, on a more global scale, we might ask who was more use to their fellow man? We have seen already that Lot's testimony was resented by the people of Sodom and was little more than a joke to his family. When the judgement of God fell, Lot had to be dragged away from the scene of carnage, unable to do anything for those around him and, with faith unable to face the pilgrim life, wanting only to settle down again in a little city. Abraham on the other hand had spent time in the presence of God, interceding in prayer if you like. Through his actions, any righteous people in Sodom were given a reprieve.

We may often feel that we want to improve the society in which we live. That is right and proper. God does too! I think from these two chapters though we see that the best way to do this is not by immersing ourselves in the politics of our world, or by forming societies for the improvement of things. The best way we can really have an influence upon our society is by spending time with God and praying for our friends and neighbours. God may well then send us to them to serve and speak to them. We have already seen this in the life of Abraham. There is a time to act – for food banks and acts of charity, for speaking out against injustice and immorality, but that time is always after we have spent time with God first. It is as He sends in preparation for what He is going to do.

Thirdly, both Lot and Abraham saw the judgement of God. They both saw what God was doing, but it was only Abraham who understood what God was doing. That path of closeness to God and in at least some measure understanding what God is doing is open to all. God does not have a small circle of favourites with whom He shares His plans. But we only enjoy communion with God when, like Abraham, we live in daily dependence on God. If we are not listening for His voice, then we are unlikely to hear Him when He does speak. If we are not living the pilgrim life with Him, then we are unlikely to really know His voice. It is a remarkable privilege to be able to enter into the thoughts of God and His purposes, but it must start with a desire in our hearts to listen to Him.

In John's Gospel chapter 10, Jesus spoke about His sheep knowing His voice and hearing His words. Then they would follow Him where He led them. I know that so often I blunder about life not really knowing what the right thing to do is. When I have a choice to make, I fret and worry. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that I have not spent enough time beforehand, during the quiet times, learning to listen to the voice of God in my daily quiet times of prayer and Bible study. The option of understanding the ways of God is, like Abraham, open to us but it will not happen by chance. Desiring time in His presence, even when figuratively speaking, God is ready to move on, so that we leave our comfort zone to go with Him, is the challenge to each one of us today.

As we draw to a close today, I would like to challenge you, and in doing so, challenge myself, as to what this pilgrim pathway is going to look like in modern days. We are not called to sell up and go and live in a tent. We are not called to give up our work and wait for a miraculous visit from God. That said, when the Lord comes again, all that we have in terms of our earthly possessions will be lost to us forever, gone to enrich unbelievers. The pilgrim life must involve holding the things of this life as lightly as possible. For each of us this will be different.

I used to have some friends who owned a minibus. They did so to help take young people to church and often helped us out doing this invaluable service. It was quite right for them to spend so much on transport. God has not called me to do this kind of work, so it would be quite wrong to say that because they have spent so much on their transport so can I. Others have opened their homes or worked long hours to earn money they can then give to God's work. But the motivation has always been keeping this world's material things in their proper perspective. We need to be aware that there is a danger in possessions in that they tend to tie us to this world, and start to take our focus off the Lord and onto the possessions. This was something that Abraham had learned to do, and was one of the reasons why God would call him "His friend." So dear listener, where are you sitting today? Completely immersed in this world's problems and delights? Or are you waiting for God to speak and call you to increasing intimacy with Him.

Thank you for listening to this truth for today talk on the communion of faith – learning to listen, talk number T1148.

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